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The Church Fathers Assessed
Nature, Bible and Morality in Jean Barbeyrac
Joris van Eijnatten

In the eighteenth century, natural law thinkers tended to tread the narrow path between affirming Revelation at the cost of Reason on the one hand, and asserting Reason at the cost of Revelation on the other. When all has been said and done, to which body of divine writ will we have truly pledged our allegiance? Do we recognize Revelation or Reason, the Book of Books or the Book of Nature? Few eighteenth-century writers on natural law would have denied that both Scripture and Nature were books writ large by God for all mankind. Most were content to acknowledge truths derived by reason from nature without expressly denying the truths of faith contained in the Bible. Problems arose when truths of reason appeared to contradict truths of faith. In such cases, natural law thinkers—such as the Huguenot Jean Barbeyrac (1674-1744)—usually contended that what appeared to be truths of faith to previous generations were actually untruths. Consequently, truths of faith had to be subject to reinterpretation, and the guardians of religious truths would do well to devote some time to the study of natural law. Such contentions unavoidably brought men like Barbeyrac into conflict with clergymen as the keepers of the faith. Not surprisingly, eighteenth-century natural law thinkers often reveal a pronounced anticlerical streak. Because of his life-long devotion to natural law and moral philosophy, a moderate, Protestant anticlericalism also became second nature to Barbeyrac. This contribution examines Barbeyrac's anticlerical reading of nature and natural law, which led to his critique of the Church Fathers. After a brief biographical outline, I shall focus on anticlerical tendencies in Barbeyrac's writings, then discuss his appraisal of the moral philosophy of the Church Fathers, and finally assess Barbeyrac's moral reading of nature.

Jean Barbeyrac was born at Béziers in the Languedoc (southern France), on 15 March 1674, as the eldest son of Antoine Barbeyrac (d. 1690), a Huguenot minister of Provençal origin.¹ Jean was destined to follow his father's example. In these years prior to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, when the position of French Protestants was becoming increasingly precarious, Jean was sent to Montpellier to be educated by his uncle Charles Barbeyrac, a

¹ For Barbeyrac's biography, see Philippe Meylan, *Jean Barbeyrac (1674-1744) et les débuts de l'enseignement du droit dans l'ancienne Académie de Lausanne. Contribution à l'histoire du droit naturel* (Lausanne, [1937]);

physician of great repute. Following the revocation in 1685, Antoine Barbeyrac left France for Lausanne, leaving behind three of his four children, including Jean. A few months later, Jean Barbeyrac, now aged eleven, was able to escape to Switzerland via Lyon.

After studying Greek, Hebrew, philosophy and theology at Lausanne and Frankfurt an der Oder, Barbeyrac eventually settled in Berlin. He had preached for several years in the Walloon community in and around Berlin when the Elector of Brandenburg, Frederick III, in 1697 appointed him at the Berlin Gymnasium as a teacher of ancient languages. Frustrated in his attempt to become a full minister of the French church—his supposed Socinian leanings thwarted what might have been an ecclesiastical career—he turned instead to the study of natural law. His 1706 translation of Samuel Pufendorf earned him a reputation as a law scholar of intellectual standing. In 1710, Barbeyrac returned to Lausanne to become professor of law and history. He received his doctorate in law only in 1717, when he exchanged the post in Lausanne for a professorship in public and private law at Groningen. He would teach law at Groningen University, whence he had been enticed by the offer of a substantial salary and a house in the middle of the town, for almost three decades.

Barbeyrac's thought should be interpreted in the light of his various experiences with religious intolerance, including (1) the oppression and persecution he underwent in France, (2) the hostility of his fellow Huguenots in Berlin, and, (3) in Lausanne, the demand of the reigning Swiss orthodoxy that clergymen and academics subscribe to the *Formula Consensus* (the Swiss ecclesiastical formularies of concord). Such experiences fuelled his interest in natural law and moral philosophy, his religious liberalism and anticlericalism, his call for freedom of conscience and his demand that church and clergy submit to secular political authority.²

Barbeyrac's first work of international acclaim was an edited translation of Samuel Pufendorf's *Le droit de la nature & des gens*, which appeared in two volumes in 1706 (original Latin version 1672).³ Barbeyrac's stylistic redrafting of the text, his painstaking verification of Pufendorf's references to other works, and his own critical annotations, reveal his training both as a classicist and a jurist. Of particular importance is the fact that he

S.C. Othmer, *Berlin und die Verbreitung des Naturrechts in Europa. Kultur- und sozialgeschichtliche Studien zu Jean Barbeyracs Pufendorf-Übersetzungen und eine Analyse seiner Leserschaft* (Berlin, 1970).

² On Barbeyrac as a natural law scholar, see Simone Zurbuchen, *Naturrecht und natürliche Religion. Zur Geschichte des Toleranzproblems von Samuel Pufendorf bis Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Würzburg, 1991), espec. chapter 6; Fabrizio Lomonaco, *Tolleranza e libertà di coscienza. Filosofia, diritto e storia tra Leida e Napoli nel secolo XVIII* (Naples, 1999).

addressed himself specifically to a broad, francophone audience, who, as he said, had no access to proper handbooks of moral philosophy. Not an original thinker, and not given to synthesis, Barbeyrac owed his reputation in the eighteenth century to his considerable abilities as a translator and commentator of major writers on natural law and moral philosophy: Samuel Pufendorf, Hugo Grotius and Richard Cumberland. His work on natural law was, it seems, largely motivated by his desire to guarantee human liberty over and against arbitrary rule and to denounce a clergy prejudiced in favour of political and spiritual tyranny. Barbeyrac's Protestant anticlericalism⁴ is evidenced in most of his writings. These include his translations of two academic orations by the Leiden law scholar Gerard Noodt; characteristic of Barbeyrac's approach is that he appended a long, anticlerical footnote to Gerard Noodt's *Discours sur la liberté de conscience* (1707).⁵ In the *Traité du jeu* (1709) he showed that, contrary to what orthodox divines asserted, games involving skill or chance were prohibited neither by Christian morality nor by natural law.⁶ His *Discours sur l'utilité des lettres et des sciences, par rapport au bien de l'état*, an oration held in Lausanne in 1714 at the end of his rectorate, lamented the tyranny that was the result of ignorance, especially ignorance in religious matters.⁷

Most revealing, perhaps, is the address Barbeyrac held in 1721, four years after his arrival in Groningen: *De magistratu, forte peccante, e pulpitis sacris non traducendo*.⁸ The address questioned the lawfulness of denouncing magistrates from the pulpit. Barbeyrac's message was unmistakeable. No clergyman, he claimed, has the right to publicly criticize the magistracy for any reason whatsoever. A minister of the church has the same obligation as any other citizen. Public criticism of the magistracy leads to chaos and rebellion, all the more so when the critics are clergymen, who have a profound spiritual influence on the common people. Above all, Barbeyrac's address amounted to a critique of what he considered the

³ Samuel Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens, ou système général des principes les plus importants de la morale, de la jurisprudence, et de la politique (...)* traduit du Latin par Jean Barbeyrac (Leiden, 1759).

⁴ On anticlericalism within the Dutch context, cf. Heinz Schilling, 'Afkeer van domineesheerschappij: Ein neuzeitlicher Typus des Antiklerikalismus', in: P.A. Dykema, H.A. Oberman, eds., *Anticlericalism in late medieval and early modern Europe* (Leiden etc., 1993) pp. 655-668.

⁵ Van Eijnatten, 'Gerard Noodt's standing in the eighteenth-century Dutch debate on religious freedom', in: *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History* 79/1 (1999) pp. 74-98.

⁶ *Traité du jeu, où l'on examine les principales questions de droit naturel et de morale qui ont du rapport à cette matière* (Amsterdam, 1709).

⁷ *Discours sur l'utilité des lettres et des sciences, par rapport au bien de l'état* (Geneva, 1714).

⁸ *Joannis Barbeyracii jurisconsulti, & publici privatique juris antecessoris, Oratio de magistratu, forte peccante, e pulpitis sacris non traducendo (...)*, Amsterdam, Petrus de Coup, 1721. See Joris van Eijnatten, 'Swiss Anticlericalism in the United Provinces. Jean Barbeyrac's *Oratio de Magistratu, Forte Peccante, e Pulpitis Sacris non Traducendo* (1721)', in: Henri Méchoulan, Richard H. Popkin, Giuseppe Ricuperati, Luisa Simonutti, eds., *La formazione storica della alterità. Studi di storia della tolleranza nell'età moderna offerti a Antonio Rotondò*, 3 vols., Florence, 2001, III, pp. 861-886.

clergy's tendency to unlawfully establish their own independent jurisdiction. His address was a refutation of traditional Calvinist as well as Roman Catholic claims that the church, even if it was the 'public' or 'dominant' church, should be substantially independent of secular government.

Finally, there is the *Traité de la morale des pères de l'Eglise* (1728),⁹ a learned response to an equally erudite volume by a French Benedictine, Dom Rémi Ceillier (1688-1761). In his *Apologie de la morale des pères de l'église*, Ceillier had firmly rejected what he regarded as a cavalier treatment of the Church Fathers in Barbeyrac's preface to *Le droit de la nature & des gens*.¹⁰ Barbeyrac's general point in the *Traité de la morale* was twofold. Firstly, he pointed out that the Church Fathers from Clement of Alexandria to Gregory the Great had little to offer in the way of moral philosophy. Secondly, he argued that the arguments adduced by Ceillier in their defence were 'fausses, foibles, ou forcées', supported only by injury and invective larded with a veneer of courteous moderation and replete 'de choses tout-à-fait hors d'oeuvre, de questions triviales, rebattuës, & dès-long tems épuisées'.¹¹ The twelfth chapter of the *Traité*, on Gregory of Nazianz, which focused on the distinction between civil and ecclesiastical toleration, would embark on a bibliographical and intellectual career of its own. Translated into Dutch, it would be included in influential anthologies of texts, which also included Gerard Noodt's *Discours sur la liberté de conscience* and John Locke's *Letter on Toleration*.¹²

Illustrative of Barbeyrac's approach to nature and natural law is his 100-page preface to the enlarged, 1712 edition of his Pufendorf translation, *Le droit de la nature & des gens*. In this widely read preface, which would later elicit the praise of, among others, Voltaire, Barbeyrac contrasted 'the speculative sciences' with what he called the 'science des moeurs', or moral philosophy. While speculative sciences were unproductive and esoteric (Barbeyrac found an apt quotation to this effect in the *Port-Royal Logic*), the 'science des moeurs' was accessible to anybody willing to make proper use of his reason. In Barbeyrac's view, the 'science des

⁹ *Traité de la morale des peres de l'Eglise: où en defendant un article de la preface sur Puffendorf, contre l'Apologie de la morale des peres du P. Ceillier (...), on fait diverses reflexions sur plusieurs matieres importantes* (Amsterdam, 1728)

¹⁰ Rémi Ceillier, *Apologie de la morale des pères de l'église, contre les injustes accusations de sieur Jean Barbeyrac* (Paris, 1718)

¹¹ *Traité de la morale*, p. iii.

¹² See Joris van Eijnatten, *Mutua Christianorum tolerantia. Irenicism and toleration in the Netherlands: The Stinstra affair 1740-1745 (Studi e testi per la storia della tolleranza in Europa nei secoli XVI-XVIII 2)*, Florence 1998.

moeurs’ was a term applicable to the study of moral philosophy, natural law and *politica*. I shall simply use the term ‘moral philosophy’ in the following.

Moral philosophy, then, might be defined as a moral reading of nature. Barbeyrac contrasts this moral reading with a physical reading. There is no need, he writes, for every person to delve into the impenetrable secrets of nature, to uncover the imperceptible causes of phenomena and marvellous events, to measure the void between distant stars, or to dig into the hidden entrails of the earth. Nor is it necessary to read the books of men, to leaf through a large number of heavy tomes, to study many languages, to penetrate into the shadows of the past—in a word, to be an erudite scholar. On the contrary, all we need is to reflect a little on our own experience of life, on ourselves and on the objects that surround us. Such reflection will furnish even the simplest people with the general ideas of natural law and a reliable knowledge of basic human obligations.¹³

It is perfectly obvious, first, that human beings feel the need to regulate their conduct in order to achieve a measure of happiness; and, secondly, that God, as the creator and father of mankind, has given us the means to procure trustworthy knowledge of our obligations. Consequently, any human being must necessarily find it easy to discover the principles of moral philosophy. All men and women are capable of attaining a rudimentary understanding of morality by virtue of their Reason. If this applies to ‘people of the lowest order’, it will be evident that intelligent and cultured people (the *gens de lettres*) will be able to reach conclusions that are even more lucid.¹⁴

The larger part of Barbeyrac’s *Préface* is devoted to a brief history of the ‘science des mœurs’. His aim here is twofold. In the first place, Barbeyrac wants to offer a historical proof that man is able to, and at times actually does, come to an understanding of natural law solely through exercising his rational faculty. He demonstrates that laymen throughout the recorded history of mankind have attempted to develop such a rational moral philosophy. The examples he provides derive from ancient oriental cultures (the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, the Persians, the Indians and the Chinese), the ancient Greeks (including Thales, Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics) and the Romans (Cicero, Plutarch, Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Antonius). He concludes, however, that the study of moral philosophy only reached its apogee in the seventeenth century, in such writers as Hugo Grotius, John Selden and Samuel Pufendorf. Since time immemorial, laymen, both the philosophers of classical antiquity and modern thinkers such as Grotius and Pufendorf, have produced moral philosophy. With these lay

¹³ Jean Barbeyrac, ‘Préface’, in: Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens*, pp. xvi-xix (§ i).

writers, who supplied so many valuable insights into moral philosophy, Barbeyrac contrasts the clergy. This points to the second aim of the *Préface*, an aim that was also the chief objective of the *Traité de la morale*.

Official clergies, Barbeyrac points out in the *Traité de la morale*, have never been particularly keen on studying moral philosophy. The injunctions put forward by the ecclesiastics of all times have all too often reflected personal idiosyncrasies rather than sound moral philosophy. This applies to pagan priests, Jewish rabbis and the false doctors mentioned in the New Testament. It applies especially to the Church Fathers of the first six centuries A.D. (Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Lactantius, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Gregory van Nazianz, Ambrose, Chrysostomus, Jerome, Augustine, Leo I and Gregory the Great), but also to their followers in the Roman Church. It pertains no less to the churchmen and theologians of the Reformation. Barbeyrac is true to his Protestant roots in that he ridicules Roman Catholic beliefs and traditions. He castigates Clement of Alexandria for holding that ‘the simplest pleasures, even those pertaining to marriage, are unjust, unreasonable and contrary to the law’. Clement regards natural delights as sinful in themselves, and believes that the permission to savour such delights is an indulgence granted by God only to avoid worse evils. Such ludicrous ideas have produced, among other things, the infamous vow of celibacy, which has led to so many difficulties, and which the self-styled head of the Roman church has imposed only to strengthen his own supremacy.¹⁵ Sexual passions have been created by the ‘Author of Nature himself’, contends Barbeyrac, and they are legitimate even when they do not contribute directly to reproduction. They need only to be regulated. It is to this end that nature, via the light of Reason, prescribes marriage laws; and these laws accord perfectly with the Bible (Hebr. 13:4).¹⁶

Barbeyrac was, however, no less concerned to rebuke the Protestant clergy. Illustrative in this respect is Chapter XII, where he discusses religious toleration. Force, he claims here, does not enlighten the mind, nor can it cause the mind to change its views. Yet, men are naturally prone to err, in spite of having access to supernatural revelation—if only because there are many mysteries still, things which God has deigned to reveal only in part. Consequently, each person must be free to believe and confess whatever he believes to be true. Whoever encroaches upon this freedom trespasses on divine right. Ecclesiastical powers may not be invested with the control over consciences. The civil authorities may protect a so-

¹⁴ Barbeyrac, ‘Préface’, in: Pufendorf, *Le droit de la nature et des gens*, p. xix (§ ii).

¹⁵ *Traité de la morale*, p. 42 (IV, §§ xxxiv-xxxv).

called dominant religion, but never propagate it by force.¹⁷ Barbeyrac generally contradicts Père Ceillier's interpretation of Augustine and Gregory of Nazianz, demonstrating that these and other Church Fathers were inconsistent in the theory and practice of toleration. All that Ceillier is able to do, suffused as he is with clerical respect for patriarchal authority, is 'repetere hardiment les plus pitoiables raisons dont les Persécuteurs se servent pour justifier leur barbarie'.¹⁸ In passing, Barbeyrac expresses his regret that there are still vestiges of intolerance among the Protestants.¹⁹ His attack on Ceillier and Roman Catholicism is a classic example of double-edged polemic.

In the *Traité*, Barbeyrac rails in particular against the frequent appeals made by Rémi Ceillier to the traditions and infallibility of the Roman Catholic Church. Barbeyrac's criticism of Ceillier is partly rhetorical, in that he attempts from the outset to disqualify the method of his opponent. Ceillier, he suggests, has put so much emphasis on infallibility merely to preclude possible objections or disguise the many flaws in his arguments. The issue at stake, however, is not whether the Church Fathers are infallible or not. The real issue is whether their claims can stand the test of criticism; if whatever the Church Fathers assert is infallible, it must still hold up after rigorous rational scrutiny. In other words, it must be possible to convince even a heathen that the moral philosophy of the Church Fathers does, in fact, obtain. Ceillier can hardly deny that the law of nature has been 'written in the hearts' of heathens (Romans 2:15), and that they, too, possess the ability to explain matters according to 'les règles du Bon-Sens & de la Critique'. In any satisfactory discussion on moral philosophy, the debaters must, therefore, be at liberty to reduce clerical contentions of whatever provenance or antiquity to evident ethical principles. A heathen may, however, even proceed further, and use his powers of reason to compare Ceillier's interpretation of patristic moral injunctions with corresponding scriptural passages. Now suppose that the heathen discovers certain discrepancies between the Book of Books and the books of the Church Fathers. Ceillier will undoubtedly counter such criticism with the claim that the Bible is obscure and open to various readings, that the Church Fathers have provided posterity with the authoritative interpretation, and that we know their interpretation to be correct and authoritative because the Church says so; and the Church, of course, is infallible. At this stage of the debate the

¹⁶ *Traité de la morale*, p. 113 (VIII, § xiii).

¹⁷ *Traité de la morale*, pp. 173-177, 179 (XII, §§ XII-XX, XXXII, XXXVIII).

¹⁸ *Traité de la morale*, p. xiii.

¹⁹ *Traité de la morale*, p. 186 (XII, § xlii).

heathen will undoubtedly throw up his hands in exasperation and demand that Dom Ceillier henceforth leave him be.²⁰

Why did the Church Fathers produce such a manifestly dubious moral philosophy? Barbeyrac suggests several causes. Patristic writers were excessively attached to either purely speculative doctrine or ecclesiastical discipline. Insofar as they wrote on moral philosophy, they did so superficially and unsystematically, offering conclusions that were not derived from basic principles but from feeble or eccentric notions, and often from bizarre allegories. They had no interest in developing linguistic skills and neglected the rules of criticism, so that they vented awkward explanations of even the clearest biblical passages. They followed no proper order and method, and simply larded their discourses haphazardly with expository or ethical declarations. No wonder, then, that the Church Fathers fell into errors on issues that are quite evident to anybody who has adequately ‘penetrated into the true principles of moral thought’.²¹

In bringing the Church Fathers to trial before the court of Reason, Barbeyrac has a field day. Augustine’s arguments on property, he contends, are similar to, and just as specious as, the contentions of Thomas Hobbes. Both men believed that the principle of ‘mine and thine’ did not apply in the state of nature. It was a pity that Hobbes did not utilize Augustine’s impressive authority, since the latter’s mere approval would have made Hobbes’s writings palatable to everyone. Indeed, there are authors who have taken up the Augustinian-Hobbesian argument, contending that property rights exist only in civil society, and that an absolute monarch is crucial to their maintenance. ‘Il n’y a que trop d’exemples, qui prouvent, combien les Ecclésiastiques de l’Eglise Romaine savent persuader aux Rois, qu’ils sont maîtres absolus & des Biens & des Vies de leurs Sujets; bien entendu qu’ils ne touchent point à ce qui regarde les Personnes & les Biens de ces mêmes Ecclésiastiques (...).’²² Barbeyrac is thinking of that other ecclesiastic, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet.

The respect we owe to divine authority, claims Barbeyrac, implies that we use ‘la Droite Raison’, or ‘right reason’.²³ Thus, in his view the contents of the Book of Nature are reflected in the contents of the Book of Scripture. Of those duties which the Bible commands us to observe, the larger part may be known solely by the light of Reason. Certainly, the Bible does provide much stronger incentives to do one’s duty than the motivations that Reason, left to itself, is able to determine. Nevertheless, by virtue of his reason alone, man is capable of

²⁰ *Traité de la morale*, pp. ix-xii.

²¹ *Traité de la morale*, pp. 7-8 (I, §§ vi-vii).

²² *Traité de la morale*, pp. 302-303 (XVI, § xxviii).

establishing general ethical principles; and by virtue of this ability, he is under the obligation to do so. Having ascertained general principles, moreover, man must proceed to establish also particular moral rules. This obligation to determine a sound—that is, a rational—moral philosophy applies especially to those who have been called to educate others. It therefore concerns, above all, ‘les Ministres Publics de la Religion’. Moral philosophy should be the chief study of all pastors, who must subsequently teach by word or in writing the results of their studies to the people. The question pondered by Barbeyrac in the *Traité de la morale* is whether the Church Fathers did, in fact, develop a reliable moral philosophy; and his answer is simply that, no, they did not.²⁴

Take, by way of example, Saint Cyprian’s treatment of the following passage from the Lord’s sermon on the mount, concerning oaths: ‘Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black’ (Matthew 5:36). Cyprian concludes from this that the female habit of using wigs and false hair is contrary to the moral law promulgated by Jesus. Ceillier, the apologist for the Church Fathers, observes sincerely enough that Cyprian’s account of the biblical text seems to express ingenuity more than it does solidity; but then, the Roman Catholic priest remarks, in moral philosophy it is not necessary that conclusions are drawn with metaphysical rigour. How so?, questions Barbeyrac. Cyprian’s method is based on neither Revelation nor Reason, and therefore untenable. Moreover, to suppose that the moral injunctions put forward in divinely inspired writings are more ingenious than solid is unworthy of an exegete. It would be better to simply admit that we do not fully understand the passage in question. Above all, it is beneath the dignity of a moral philosopher to abandon the ‘clear and simple’ precepts of the gospels and the arguments derived from nature by resorting to falsehood or the imagination—or, as Barbeyrac puts it, to quench one’s thirst from a filthy cistern rather than the pure source.²⁵

To an eighteenth-century Protestant, the Church Fathers’ stubborn rejection of the purified contents of the Books of Nature and Scripture was conspicuous, to put it mildly. The register of the *Traité de la morale* offers a long catalogue of patriarchal flaws. The Fathers believed the Seventy who wrote the Septuaginta to have been divinely inspired. They considered the Old Testament to be replete with the notions of the cross and the crucifixion. Most accepted as true the corporality of angels and the fact that fallen angels had intercourse with women. They had no reservation in putting their faith in apocryphal writings. They allegorised

²³ *Traité de la morale*, p. xii.

²⁴ *Traité de la morale*, p. 7 (I, § v).

²⁵ *Traité de la morale*, p. 122 (V, § xxxiii).

examples of dubious morality in the Bible, supposing that Holy Writ did not condemn such instances of bad conduct. They spurned remarriage, forbade intercourse with pregnant women, proscribed self-defence and outlawed usury.²⁶ In the process, Barbeyrac casts doubt on the scholarship of such Catholic historians as Ceillier, Jean Baptiste Cotelier, Du Pin, Massuet, Denis Petau (Petavius), Jean Potter, Nicolas Rigault, Tillemont and the editors of the *Mémoires de Trevoux*, and finds support in such Protestant authorities as Calvin, Jean Daillé and Daniel Whitby. Yet, in gauging their work on the Church Fathers, he also praises Pierre Daniel Huet, Fénelon and Montfaucon, and condemns Hugo Grotius and Pierre Jurieu. Throughout, Barbeyrac sets great store by critical scholarship, attempting to win the respect of the Lutheran churchman Johann Franz Budde (whom he regards ‘comme un Savant Théologien, & ce qui est bien plus estimable, comme un Théologien modéré’),²⁷ who had expressed some disagreement with Barbeyrac in his *Isagoge historico-theologica*. As for Barbeyrac himself, he generally associated the Church Fathers with unreasonableness, lack of judgement, unfairness, harshness, credulity, susceptibility to the imagination, and an inordinate liking for allegory, leading to ideas that were more often than not ‘vagues, confuses, superficielles, mal liées, outrées’. This he contrasts with a critical and reasonable approach to Nature and Scripture, with the exercise of the ‘lumières de la Raison’ or the ‘principes généraux de cette *Loi Naturelle*, qui est gravée dans le coeur de tous les Hommes’,²⁸ the results of which activity should be put down in a plain but elegant style.

How to assess Barbeyrac’s moral reading of the Book of Nature? Barbeyrac was more than just an anticlerical thinker, of course, and his anticlericalism is moderate enough. If Barbeyrac opposed, above all, the arbitrary exercise of power in the church as well as the state, he certainly did not wish to dispense with the spiritual services afforded by an established clergy. He believed that a prince or magistracy ought to be concerned primarily with the welfare of the commonwealth and the well being of its individual members. This implied that the civil authorities were to guarantee freedom of conscience, which in turn required that the church and the clergy should be subjected unequivocally to the authority of the state. In the *Préface* and the *Traité de la morale des Pères*, Barbeyrac attempted to demonstrate, first, that there is no call to respect the moral authority of the clergy in general, and the Church Fathers in particular, since their moral philosophy is shoddy and arbitrary. Secondly, he argued that

²⁶ *Traité de la morale*, Register, under ‘Pères de l’Eglise’.

²⁷ *Traité de la morale*, pp. xiv-xv.

²⁸ *Traité de la morale*, p. xviii.

moral rules ought to be derived from Scripture and Reason and not from dubious claims to authority or even infallibility. If God is the ‘Author of Nature’, he is also the author of Scripture; and the one cannot contradict the other. Barbeyrac, then, juxtaposed Reason and Revelation. The end result is that, for him, the nature has become normative in all matters unrelated to speculative doctrine, and that it must be read closely in order to achieve an equitable society.

Barbeyrac was a writer of substantial influence.²⁹ He owed his popularity to his use of the French language and to his rich commentaries, but also to his simple juxtaposition of Reason and Revelation; the way he did so can hardly be qualified as outrageous in the context of eighteenth-century Protestant thought. However, quite radical conclusions might be drawn from the way he utilized critical historical scholarship to undermine clerical and ecclesiastical tradition, and the way he employed Reason as a means to set the Books of Bible and Nature on what to all appearances was an equal footing. It seems that Barbeyrac’s thought may be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, he was instrumental in disseminating the thought of John Locke and Gerard Noodt to a wider audience, and in popularising the study of natural law. Through his legal commentaries, his urgent appeal to the Book of Nature as a book of rational and equitable morality reached audiences ranging from Paris to the distant American colonies. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to interpret Barbeyrac’s thought on politics and religion, and on the relations between the two, as inconsistent in its elitism. One of Barbeyrac’s main contributions to the philosophy of his day was an in-depth theory of the individual conscience.³⁰ Drawing partly on the moral epistemology of John Locke, and specifically rejecting the Pyrrhonism (i.e. the scepticism) of Pierre Bayle, Barbeyrac tended to conflate the self-sufficient and independent human conscience on the one hand with Reason on the other. According to Barbeyrac, moral concepts are available to each man’s rational conscience. Apparently he failed to fully acknowledge the logical outcome of his theory, let alone to offer a solution to the problems it posed. Leibniz, in his critique of Pufendorf, had pointed out two difficulties. In the first place, the Pufendorf-Barbeyrac line of thought ultimately led to the subordination of God’s authority to that of human reason. In the second place, Barbeyrac’s emphasis on the individual conscience and the right of resistance to

²⁹ Roman Catholic apologists recognized him as an important adversary; cf. Kathleen Hardesty Doig, ‘The Abbé Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier and the History of Heresy’, in: John Christian Laursen ed., *Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe. For, Against, and Beyond Persecution and Toleration* (New York, Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 263-280.

³⁰ For the following, see T.J. Hochstrasser, ‘The Claims of Conscience: Natural Law Theory, Obligation, and Resistance in the Huguenot Diaspora’, in: John Christian Laursen, ed., *New Essays on the Political Thought of the Huguenots of the Réfuge* (Leiden etc., 1995), pp. 15-51.

tyranny implied an acknowledgement of the ability of men from all social stations to take political action. Barbeyrac's ambiguous position on both issues is illustrated by his somewhat inconclusive response to Leibniz, which was included as the *Jugement d'un Anonyme* in the third edition of Pufendorf's *Devoirs de l'homme*. Admitting that obligation derives ultimately from the will of God, Barbeyrac restricted the right of resistance to the political elite. Incidentally, he was not much enamoured of Leibniz, whom he had known in Berlin, and whom he considered to be jealous, domineering and irritable. In any case, Barbeyrac did not, and was probably both unwilling and unable to, solve the two ambiguities in his thought on conscience and Reason.

As an anticlerical protégé of the Groningen magistracy, Barbeyrac restricted the right to resistance to tyranny to the political leadership, while he did not dispute the idea of a dominant or public religion. He shared this inclination to support the political elite, and to maintain a latitudinarian ecclesiastical establishment, with the Dutch republican tradition as it had evolved from Grotius to Noodt.³¹ As a latitudinarian Huguenot, dependant on the goodwill of foreign masters, Barbeyrac retained the will of God to prevent the moral and political order from losing its moorings in the divine order. At the same time, he strongly emphasized the liberty of conscience over ecclesiastical tyranny, as well as Reason over religious tradition. Barbeyrac's philosophy of natural law may be construed as a defence of the political and religious status quo of the Dutch (or, for that matter, Genevan) Republic.³² On the other hand, it would only be fair to point out that his anticlerical reading of the Book of Nature served as an important catalyst in eighteenth-century debates on religious liberty and toleration.

Abstract

In his *Traité de la morale des peres de l'Eglise* (1728), the French-German-Dutch Huguenot Jean Barbeyrac (1674-1744) responded at length to critical reflections previously made by the French Benedictine Dom Rémi Ceillier (1688-1761) in the *Apologie de la morale des pères de l'église* (1718). Ceillier had made exception to what he regarded as the cavalier treatment of the Church Fathers in Barbeyrac's translation of Pufendorf's *Le droit de la nature & des gens*. Barbeyrac put forward his objections in the *Traité de la morale*, pointing out that the moral philosophy of the major patristic writers was both unbiblical and unreasonable. He assessed the Church Fathers' moral philosophy by judging it against both nature and the Bible as the two authoritative sources of moral knowledge. Barbeyrac juxtaposed Reason and Revelation, arguing that nature is normative in all matters unrelated to speculative doctrine. His historical scholarship and his views of nature implicitly seem to lead to quite radical

³¹ Joris van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord in the United Provinces. Religious Toleration and the Public in the Eighteenth-Century Netherlands* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 111) (Leiden, 2003).

³² For the Genevan context, see Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva. From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762* (Cambridge, 1997).

interpretations, including a deist view of the Christian revelation and an affirmation of absolute political equality. Barbeyrac's own thought, however, does not appear to be free from religious and political ambiguities. The source of these ambiguities may well be his somewhat delicate position as a Huguenot refugee dependent on the support of foreign masters.

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